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APPLICATION FOR LETTERS PATENT

for

**COMPLIANT CONTACT PIN ASSEMBLY, CARD SYSTEM
AND METHODS THEREOF**

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TITLE OF THE INVENTION
COMPLIANT CONTACT PIN ASSEMBLY, CARD SYSTEM
AND METHODS THEREOF

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0001] Field of the Invention: The present invention relates to semiconductor devices and circuits and, more particularly, to compliant contact pins and methods of fabrication for connecting electrical signals to integrated circuits.

[0002] State of the Art: Semiconductor devices, from microprocessors to memory chips, are fabricated by performing a long series of processes and steps including etching, masking, depositing and the like on a semiconductor wafer or other bulk semiconductor substrate. Many integrated circuits may be fabricated on a single semiconductor wafer by placing them in arrays across the wafer. Ultimately, the individual circuits are singulated from the wafer and are either further processed, including packaging and additional testing, or discarded when they are determined to be undesirable.

[0003] Due to processing or other defects in the semiconductor wafer, certain ones of the integrated circuits may not function as designed. Such defects may be detected initially or may not become apparent until the integrated circuit has been in operation for a period of time. Therefore, it is important to test and electrically stress the integrated circuits to determine which circuits are operational and which ones are defective or are likely to become defective.

[0004] Semiconductor integrated circuits are typically subjected to a series of test procedures during the manufacturing process in order to verify functionality and reliability. Typical test approaches include wafer probe testing in which integrated circuits are individually tested to determine the operational characteristic of each before singulation from the semiconductor wafer.

[0005] Conventionally following initial testing, the integrated circuits are singulated into individual integrated circuit chips with the operational chips being further assembled into packages. The packaged devices are then “burned-in” by loading the packaged devices into sockets on burn-in boards and electrically operating the packaged devices at elevated

temperatures for an extended testing period. Such elevated temperatures induce failure in marginally operative or nonoperative devices, which allows such devices to be screened-out and discarded before they are integrated into higher level assemblies or sold. Burning-in and testing of packaged devices are typically accomplished through the use of sockets suited for the burn-in conditions and high speed testing. Accordingly, conventional manufacturing and testing processes are expensive and time consuming because of the repeated handling and testing of individual devices, therefore, individually tested and handled devices that ultimately fail have wasted costly resources and time.

[0006] A considerable advantage in cost and in process time could be attained by burning-in and testing a semiconductor wafer before it is singulated into discrete devices. Additional savings may be recognized by forgoing packaging of devices that ultimately fail once subjected to burn-in conditions. A considerable effort has been expended to develop effective methods for wafer level testing. One such approach utilizes cantilevered or spring-wire probes which are arranged on a contact or probe card for simultaneous contact to all of the devices on the semiconductor wafer. Such contactor cards are expensive to manufacture and result in undesirable electrical characteristics such as increased inductance along parallel wires.

[0007] Therefore, there is a need for providing a contact methodology which results in a highly economically manufacturable method of contacting individual semiconductor devices in a wafer-level testing environment.

[0008] Furthermore, individual dies generally need to be packaged into a higher assembly before they may be integrated into a system environment. These higher assemblies or packages generally need to accommodate or compensate for differences in thermal expansion between the individual die and the system level substrate. Therefore, there is a need for providing a contact methodology which mediates stresses between dissimilar materials.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0009] A compliant contact pin assembly, card and methods associated therewith are provided in various embodiments. In one embodiment of the present invention, a contact pin assembly includes a contact pin formed in place from a portion of a substrate. The contact pin is compliantly held suspended within the substrate by a compliant coupling structure. The

suspension within the substrate results in a compliant deflection orthogonal to the plane of the substrate.

[0010] In another embodiment of the present invention, a method for forming a contact pin assembly is provided. A location for the contact pin is defined on a substrate in a location which corresponds to a target contact pad on a, for example, wafer to be tested. The substrate around the location is thinned for approximately the length of travel of the contact pin on the side defined as the contact end side. The substrate is locally thinned to a depth of at least the length of the contact pin immediately around the location of the contact pin to form a void surrounding the contact pin. The void is filled with compliant coupling material and the opposite side of the substrate is thinned to release the contact pin from the remaining substrate.

[0011] In another embodiment of the present invention, a method for forming a contact pin assembly wherein the substrate provides the compliant action for the contact pin is provided. The location for the contact pin is defined on the substrate and the substrate is thinned around the location. Further thinning around the contact pin forms a void. The opposite side of the substrate is thinned but not all the way through to the void. Instead the remaining substrate on the opposite side flexes when the contact end of the contact pin encounters and presses against a pad on a wafer or other device under test.

[0012] In yet a further embodiment of the present invention, a device assembly for coupling with a device to form an assembly for coupling with a substrate having a contact pad thereon. The device assembly includes a contact pin assembly and a device attached thereto.

[0013] In yet another embodiment of the present invention, a contactor card for interfacing between a tester and a device-under-test is provided. The contactor card includes a substrate configured for attachment with a semiconductor tester. The substrate further includes at least one contact pin assembly aligned for compliantly coupling with a device-under-test, such as a wafer. In a further embodiment, a method for making a contactor card is provided. The method forms at least one contact pin assembly on the substrate of the contactor card.

[0014] In yet a further embodiment, a method of testing a semiconductor wafer is provided. The method aligns the contact pads on a semiconductor wafer with the corresponding contact pad assemblies of a contactor card and the mates the card together such that the contact pins compliantly mate with the contact pads. Test signals are applied and monitored through the

contactor card. In still another embodiment of the present invention, a semiconductor wafer testing system is provided and includes a contactor card as described and a tester for generating and analyzing test signals.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE SEVERAL VIEWS OF THE DRAWINGS

[0015] In the drawings, which illustrate what is currently considered to be the best mode for carrying out the invention:

[0016] FIGS. 1A-1I show a sequence of cross sectional views illustrating the process steps of a method for fabricating a compliant contact pin assembly, according to an embodiment of the present invention;

[0017] FIG. 2 is a cross sectional view illustrating a compliant contact pin assembly, in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention;

[0018] FIG. 3 is a cross sectional view of a compliant contact pin assembly in a compliant state, in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention;

[0019] FIG 4 is a cross sectional view of a compliant contact pin assembly, in accordance with another embodiment of the present invention;

[0020] FIG. 5 is a cross sectional view of a compliant contact pin assembly in a compliant state, in accordance with another embodiment of the present invention;

[0021] FIGS 6A-6E show a sequence of cross sectional views illustrating a portion of the process steps of a method for fabricating a compliant contact pin assembly, in accordance with one or more other embodiments of the present invention;

[0022] FIG. 7 is a cross sectional view illustrating a further process of forming a contact tip, in accordance with a further embodiment of the present invention;

[0023] FIG. 8 is a cross sectional view illustrating a further process of forming a contact tip, in accordance with another embodiment of the present invention;

[0024] FIG. 9 illustrates a device assembly utilizing a contact pin assembly, in accordance with another embodiment of the present invention;

[0025] FIG. 10 illustrates a device assembly utilizing a contact pin assembly, in accordance with yet another embodiment of the present invention;

[0026] FIGS. 11A-C show a sequence of cross-sectional views illustrating a compliant contact pin assembly, in accordance with another embodiment of the present invention;

[0027] FIGS. 12A-12C show a sequence of cross sectional views illustrating a further portion of the process steps for fabricating contact ends on a compliant contact pin assembly, in accordance with one or more other embodiments of the present invention;

[0028] FIGS. 13A-13C show a sequence of cross sectional views illustrating a further portion of the process steps for fabricating contact ends on a compliant contact pin assembly, in accordance with one or more other embodiments of the present invention;

[0029] FIGS. 14A-14G show a sequence of cross sectional views illustrating a portion of the process steps of a method for fabricating a compliant contact pin assembly, in accordance with yet one or more other embodiments of the present invention;

[0030] FIG. 15 shows a cross sectional view of a compliant contact pin assembly, in accordance with a further embodiment of the present invention;

[0031] FIGS. 16A-16F show a sequence of cross sectional views illustrating a portion of the process steps of a method for fabricating a double sided compliant contact pin assembly, in accordance with a yet further embodiment of the present invention;

[0032] FIG. 17 shows a cross sectional view of a double sided compliant contact pin assembly, in accordance with a yet further embodiment of the present invention;

[0033] FIG. 18 shows a cross sectional view of a compliant contact pin assembly, in accordance with a further embodiment of the present invention;

[0034] FIG. 19 is a cross sectional view of a compliant contact pin assembly in a compliant state, in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention; and

[0035] FIG. 20 is a block diagram of a testing system, in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0036] The present invention, according to the various embodiments described, is drawn to compliant contacting structure and methods for providing electrically conductive contact pins formed from and within a generally planar substrate. The various views and diagrams are illustrated generally as cross sectional views for clarity; however, the specific

formed profiles and devices may be arranged across the surface of the substrate and with various orientations and geometries as are desirable, as will be appreciated by those of ordinary skill in the art.

[0037] In FIG. 1A, substrate 10 has defined thereon a location 12 for the formation of a contact pin. Substrate 10 may comprise a silicon wafer, a ceramic substrate, a glass substrate, a quartz substrate, or other suitable material. At the location 12, a mask layer 14 is placed on the top or contact end side of substrate 10. The profile of mask layer 14 identifies the general cross sectional geometry of an emerging contact pin to be formed at location 12. Mask layer 14 may be thermally grown silicon oxide, CVD silicon oxide or CVD silicon nitride. Substrate 10 preferably includes a crystal orientation allowing for selectively etching as an isotropic etch. In FIG. 1B, the silicon etch is stopped at a distance 16 corresponding to an approximate contact pin travel distance. The contact travel distance may be heuristically derived as a function of the elasticity or flexibility of the compliant coupling means described below. As illustrated, the etch is preferably an isotropic etch resulting in side walls 18 which exhibit an approximate orthogonal relationship to thinned contact end surface 20.

[0038] In FIG. 1C, additional mask layers 22 of the same general nature as mask layer 14 are placed on thinned contact end surface 20 for the formation of stops which regulate the travel distance of the contact pin under fabrication. It is noted that the stops may be discrete or generally continuous in circumscribing the emerging contact pin formed at location 12.

[0039] In FIG. 1D, substrate 10 has been further thinned or etched to form stops 24 which limit the distance of travel of the contact pin as well as provide a stand-off for particles or contaminants that may be present on the further thinned contact end surface 26 of substrate 10. In FIG. 1E, the maximum depth of the emerging contact pin 34 is defined through the formation of a void 28 surrounding the emerging contact pin 34. Void 28 may be formed in one of several manners including a photo etch process, wherein other portions of the substrate are masked and protected from the etching process. Alternatively, void 28 may be formed through laser ablation or machining. Laser machining may be performed by a micro machining laser such as the XCISE 200 available from XSIL Ltd. of Dublin, Ireland.

[0040] As illustrated in FIG. 1E, a thickness 30 of substrate 10 remains intact to support the emerging contact pin through further manufacturing processes. If substrate 10 is comprised

of a semiconductive or conductive material, an insulative layer 31, such as an oxide layer, is formed on the sidewalls of void 28. When substrate 10 is comprised of a nonconductive material, then an insulative layer is unnecessary. In one embodiment, the emerging contact pin 34, in addition to the surfaces defining void 28, are conductively coated by depositing a conductive material 32 generally over the emerging contact pin 34 and throughout the void 28. In one particular embodiment as illustrated in FIG. 1F, conductive material 32 is formed through a metallic plating process which results in conductive surfaces on remaining substrate portions 36 and on emerging contact pin 34.

[0041] A compliant coupling structure couples emerging contact pin 34 with remaining portions 36 of substrate 10. By way of example and not limitation, FIG. 1G illustrates one such structure as compliant coupling material 38. Compliant coupling material 38 at least partially fills void 28 and forms a resilient compliant interface between emerging contact pin 34 and remaining substrate portions 36 of substrate 10. One suitable type of compliant coupling material includes conductive filled elastomers, for example, those available from A. I. Technology, Inc. of Princeton Junction, N.J., and conductive filled polymers such as, for example, E3114-5 conductive polymer available from Epoxy Technology of Billerica, Massachusetts.

[0042] To enable compliant movement relative to the remaining substrate portions 36, the contact pin is released from the remaining substrate portions 36. In FIG. 1H, the back or opposite surface 40 of substrate 10 is thinned, either through an etching process or through a mechanical grinding process for at least a thickness or distance 30 to release or free contact pin 42 from adjacent portions of substrate 10. As illustrated, contact pin 42 is formed from a portion of substrate 10 and remains positioned at original location 12 through compliant coupling means, namely compliant coupling material 38.

[0043] In a specific embodiment as illustrated in FIG. 1I, contact pin 42 is further coated with additional conductive material 44 at a bottom or interconnect end 31 to encapsulate the contact pin with additional conductive material. Consistent with the formation of conductive material 32 about the contact end 29 of contact pin 32 and throughout void 28, conductive material 44 may be formed through various processing steps including electroplating or other plating or coating techniques.

[0044] FIG. 2 illustrates a contact pin assembly 46, in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention. A compliant axis 48 illustrates the axis of motion of contact pin 42 as a result of the resilient or elastic nature of compliant coupling material 38. Furthermore, in one exemplary embodiment, the compliant coupling material is electrically conductive and is illustrated as compliant coupling material 38'. Electrical continuity exists from contact tip or contact end 50 of contact pin 42 to substrate 10 by way of conductive material 32 electrically coupled with electrically conductive compliant coupling material 38' which further is electrically coupled to a portion 52 of the conductive material affixed to the remaining substrate 10. Routing of a signal detected at contact end 50 of contact pin 42 may be further routed via one or more conductive traces 54 to other desirable locations. Conductive trace 54 may be formed according to various interconnection techniques including masking, deposition and etching techniques, the specifics of which are appreciated by those of ordinary skill in the art.

[0045] In FIG. 3, contact pin assembly 46 is illustrated in a compliant state responsive to a device-under-test 56, for example, a semiconductor wafer, with a contact pad 58. The mating or coupling of the device-under-test 56 causes the displacement of contact pin 44 along a compliance axis 48 as compliant coupling material 38' resiliently deforms or compliantly responds thereto. As illustrated, stops 24 restrict the distance of travel of contact pin 42 and further protect the device-under-test and contact pin assembly 24 from damage due to contaminants, for example particles, between device under test 56 and further thinned contact end surface 26.

[0046] FIG. 4 illustrates a contact pin assembly, in accordance with another embodiment of the present invention. Contact pin assembly 46' includes a contact pin 42 compliantly retained in substrate 10 by way of a nonconductive compliant coupling material 38". Because of the nonconductive nature of material 38", electrical coupling must be provided from contact pin 42 to surrounding substrate 10. In the present embodiment, a wire bond 60 is applied between contact pin 42 and conductive trace 54. Wire bonding techniques are known by those of ordinary skill in the art and further discussion of such process is not contained herein.

[0047] FIG. 5 illustrates a coupling of a device-under-test 56 having a contact pad 58 mating with contact pin assembly 46'. As illustrated, contact pin 42 compliantly deflects along compliant axis 48 due to the resiliency of compliant coupling material 38". Also illustrated, wire bond 60 further deforms in response to the compliant motion of contact pin 42 thereby maintaining electrical continuity between contact pin 42 and conductive trace 54.

[0048] FIGS. 6A-6D illustrate yet another method of formation of a contact pin for use in a contact pin assembly, in accordance with another embodiment of the present invention. In the present embodiment, processing of substrate 10 follows preliminary processing steps according to FIGS. 1A-1E. Prior thereto, however, a bore 62 is formed entirely through substrate 10, for example centered within location 12, and through the emerging contact pin. Boring techniques may include those utilized for the formation of voids 28, namely etching and or laser ablating techniques. In FIG. 6B, bore 62 is filled with a conductive material 64 which may be formed using plating, sputtering, squeegeing or other conductive fill techniques known by those of ordinary skill in the art. This may also be effected prior to the steps of FIGS. 1A-1E. In FIG. 6C, voids 28 are filled with compliant coupling material 38 according to techniques described above with reference to FIG. 1G. In FIG. 6D, an etching or abrasive process, such as mechanical grinding or abrasive planarization such as Chemical Mechanical Planarization (CMP), removes the backside of substrate 10 for at least a distance 30 to release the emerging contact pin to form contact pin 66.

[0049] FIG. 6E illustrates an alternative approach for releasing the emerging contact pin to form contact pin 67. In the present embodiment of the present invention, contact pin 67 is released by isolating contact pin 67 from remaining substrate portions 69 of substrate 10 by forming voids 71 through one or more substrate removal processes previously described. Such processes include etching, laser machining and mechanical routing, etc.

[0050] The ends of contact pin 66 are preferably conductively coated to further facilitate electrical coupling. FIG. 7 and FIG. 8 illustrate various contact ends or tips that may be formed upon contact pin 66, 67, in accordance with respective embodiments of the present invention. In FIG. 7, a conductive material 68 is formed to provide electrical continuity with conductive material 64. Conductive material 68 may be formed using plating or other deposition processes which results in a conductive contact surface for mating with device-under-test 56

(FIGS. 3 and 5). In FIG. 8, a bump of conductive material 70 is formed on contact pin 64 for providing electrical continuity with conductive material 64. In the present embodiment, conductive material 70 may be formed using solder bumping technology such as that utilized in the formation of balls of a ball grid array (BGA) or by using a wire bond capillary to place a bump of conductive material 70. The formation of such conductive bumps is known by those of ordinary skill in the art and is not further described herein.

[0051] FIGS. 7 and 8 further illustrate the formation of one or more conductive traces 54 and the electrical coupling of conductive material 64 with a yet further conductive material 72 for providing electrical conduction with a conductive compliant material 38. The embodiments as illustrated in FIGS. 7 and 8 may also incorporate a wire bond 60 (FIG. 4) when non-electrically conductive compliant coupling material is employed.

[0052] FIG. 9 illustrates a device assembly utilizing a contact pin assembly, in accordance with another embodiment of the present invention. While compliant coupling of a contact pin assembly for temporary interconnect with a device-under-test are illustrated herein, various embodiments of the present invention also find application when permanently coupled with one or more devices to form a device assembly for further integration or coupling with a substrate such as a printed circuit board. A device assembly 112 includes a contact pin assembly 102, formed in accordance with the one or more embodiments described herein, and one or more devices 104 permanently coupled thereto. The one or more devices 104 include one or more contact pads 108 which electrically interface with the one or more contact pins 106 of the contact pin assembly 102. The device assembly 112 may then be further coupled to contact pads 110 on a substrate 114. Electrical coupling techniques for coupling devices 104 to substrate 114 via the contact pin assembly 102 are appreciated by those of ordinary skill in the art and therefore are not further described herein.

[0053] Coupling of one or more devices 104 to a substrate 114 via a contact pin assembly 102 finds application by providing an intermediary expansion medium, namely the contact pin assembly 102, for mediating variations in the expansion between devices 104 and substrate 108 when operated over temperature variations. Electrical continuity between contact pads 108 and 110 are maintained by the compliant coupling material of the contact pins 106 within the contact pin assembly 102.

[0054] FIG. 10 illustrates a device assembly utilizing a contact pin assembly, in accordance with yet another embodiment of the present invention. In the present embodiment, a redistribution layer may be implanted through the use of a contact pin assembly external to the active devices. Those of skill in the art appreciate that additional processing steps performed on active devices results in a decreased yield of operation devices due to the additional handling and processing parameters, such as elevated temperatures. Therefore, in the present embodiment, the redistribution of inner lead contact pads 118 to outer lead bond contact pads 110 is accomplished through coupling a contact pin assembly 122 to a device 104. Specifically, a device assembly 132 includes a contact pin assembly 122, formed in accordance with the one or more embodiments described herein, and one or more devices 104 permanently coupled thereto. The one or more devices 104 include one or more contact pads 118 which electrically interface with the one or more contact pins 116 of the contact pin assembly 122. The device assembly 132 may then be further coupled to contact pads 110 on a substrate 114. Electrical coupling techniques for coupling devices 104 to substrate 114 via the contact pin assembly 102 are appreciated by those of ordinary skill in the art and therefore are not further described herein.

[0055] Coupling of a device 104 to a substrate 114 via a contact pin assembly 122 finds application by providing an intermediary expansion medium, namely the contact pin assembly 122, for mediating variations in the expansion and redistributing interconnects from an inner lead bond pad 118 to an outer lead bond pad 110. Electrical continuity between contact pads 108 and 110 are maintained by the compliant coupling material of the contact pins 116 and a redistribution conductive trace 124 within the contact pin assembly 122.

[0056] FIGS. 11A-11C illustrate yet another embodiment of a contact pin for use in a contact pin assembly, in accordance with embodiments of the present invention. In the present embodiment, additional compliance is provided by the extension of a conductive material beyond the thinned backside surface of substrate 10 or, in yet another embodiment, through the capping of the contact pin with compliant conductive “bricks” or “blocks.” In the present embodiments, processing of substrate 10 undergoes processes described above for the formation of a void 28 surrounding the emerging contact pin 234. Void 28 may be formed in one of several manners described above including a photo etch process, laser machining or mechanical drilling.

[0057] A bore 262 is formed entirely through substrate 10, exemplary centered about location 12, and through the emerging contact pin. Boring techniques may include those utilized for the formation of voids 28, namely etching and or laser ablating techniques. In FIG. 11B, bore 262 is filled with a conductive material 264 which may be formed from a conductive polymer. While the filling process may be done using various techniques, two exemplary techniques include squeegeeing the material through or drawing the material through bore 262 are contemplated. In FIG. 11C, voids 28 are filled with compliant coupling material 38 according to techniques described above with reference to FIG. 1G and the contact pin is released from the remaining substrate portions, according to the process described above with reference to FIG. 1H, wherein the back or opposite surface of substrate 10 is thinned, either through an etching process or through a mechanical grinding process.

[0058] FIGS. 12A-C and 13A-C illustrate separate embodiments for releasing the emerging contact pin 234 (FIG. 11A) from the remaining substrate portions and for electrically capping the contact pin. In FIG. 12A, a masking and etching process is used to remove the backside of substrate 10 for at least a distance 230 to release the emerging contact pin to form contact pin 266. FIG. 13A illustrates an alternative approach for releasing the emerging contact pin to form contact pin 267. In the embodiment as illustrated in FIG. 13A, contact pin 267 is released by isolating contact pin 267 from remaining substrate portions 269 of substrate 10 by forming voids 71 through one or more substrate removal processes previously described. Such processes include masking and etching, laser machining and mechanical routing, etc.

[0059] The ends of contact pin 266, 267 are preferably coated to further facilitate electrical coupling and/or to extend the end of the contact pin above the substrate. FIG. 12B and FIG. 13B illustrate various contact ends or tips that may be formed upon contact pins 266, 267, in accordance with respective embodiments of the present invention. In FIG. 12B, conductive material 268 and 272 are formed to provide electrical continuity with conductive material 264. Conductive material 268 and 272 may be formed using plating or other deposition processes, including the formation of conductive polymer bricks or blocks which results in a conductive contact surface for mating with contact pad 58 of device-under-test 56 (FIG. 12C). In FIG. 13B, a conductive material 270 is formed on contact pin 267 for providing electrical continuity with conductive material 264. In the present embodiments, conductive material 270 and 274 may be

formed using, for example, including conductive deposition techniques described above, including conductive polymer bricks on the top and/or bottom of contact pin 267 which results in a conductive contact surface for mating with contact pad 58 of a device-under-test 56 (FIG. 13C). Conductive material 270 and 274 formed of conductive polymers may provide additional compliant force due to the intrinsic compressibility of, for example, the polymer.

[0060] As a further enhancement to the contact pin 267, while the conductive pads 270, 274 are in a “wet” or semi-cured state, flakes of material such as dendritic material for scrubbing the material to be probed by the contact pin may be applied to conductive pads 270, 274.

FIGS. 12C and 13C further illustrate the formation of one or more conductive traces 254, 255 and the electrical coupling of conductive material 264 with a yet further conductive material 268, 272 and 270, 274 for providing electrical conduction with a conductive compliant material 238.

[0061] FIGS. 14A-14G show a sequence of cross sectional views illustrating a portion of the process steps of a method for fabricating a compliant contact pin assembly, according to another embodiment of the present invention. The present embodiment utilizes an initial masking process to develop a very fine resolution pin outline having one or more pyramid-like shapes. Additional texturing or profiles may be developed for facilitating enhanced coupling by the contact pin, such as, for example, penetrating an oxide layer on an integrated circuit pad.

[0062] In FIG. 14A, substrate 10 has defined thereon a location 112 for the formation of a contact pin. At the location 112, a mask layer 114 is placed on the top or contact end side of substrate 10. The profile of mask layer 114 identifies the general cross sectional geometry of an emerging contact pin. Mask layer 114 may be one of various masking compositions and, is preferably a nitride mask, commonly known as a “nitride hard mask.” While mask layer 114 may completely mask the area of the substrate 10 at location 112, FIG. 14A further illustrates another optional aspect of the invention wherein texturing or profiles may be formed using one or more openings or apertures within mask layer 114, an example of which is illustrated as apertures 116. When profiles are desired at the contact end of the contact pin, a first mask 114 is place at location 112 to form any desired profile features, such as stops or self-limiting contacts. Substrate 110 may be etched under controlled conditions to obtain the fine profile features. A mask 114 may be placed over the entire location 112 including the formed profiles. Substrate 10

is bulk etched using, for example, a KOH etch process at to obtain a pyramidal-shaped etch plane.

[0063] In FIG. 14B, the processing of apertures 116 results in the formation of profiles 118 configured for enhancing the penetration of, for example, oxide layers inhibiting direct contact with underlying conductive contacts or traces of an integrated circuit pad. By way of relative dimensioning, profiles 118 are relatively short in order to be self-limiting when subjected to a contact pad of a device-under-test. By way of example and not limitation, profiles 118 may be fabricated with a height of approximately 0.33 μm . While FIGS. 14A-14G illustrate the formation of profiles 118, the formation of the profiles 118 is optional.

[0064] In FIG. 1B, the silicon etch is stopped at a distance 120 corresponding to an approximate contact pin travel distance. The contact travel distance may be heuristically derived as a function of the elasticity or flexibility of the compliant coupling means described, and for one application may be on the order of 75 μm . As illustrated, the etch is preferably an isotropic etch resulting in the side walls 122 which exhibit an approximate pyramidal relationship to thinned contact end surface 124.

[0065] In FIG. 14C, the depth of the emerging contact pin is generally defined through the formation of a void 126 surrounding the emerging contact pin. Void 126 may be formed in one of several manners including a photo etch process wherein other portions of the substrate are masked and protected from the etching process. Alternatively, void 126 may be formed through laser ablation or machining, as described above with reference to FIG. 1. As illustrated in FIG. 14C, a thickness 128 of substrate 10 remains intact to support the emerging contact pin through further manufacturing processes. When substrate 10 is semi-conductive or conductive, an insulating oxide layer 127 is formed within void 126 to insulate any electrical signals from becoming shorted or exhibiting crosstalk.

[0066] In FIG. 14D, the emerging contact pin 132 in addition to the surfaces of void 126 are conductively coated by depositing a conductive material 130 generally over the emerging contact pin 132 and throughout the void 126. Conductive material 130 may be formed through a metallic plating process, sputtering process, or other particle deposition processes which results in conductive surfaces on remaining substrate portions 134 and on emerging contact pin 132.

[0067] A compliant coupling structure couples emerging contact pin 132 with remaining portions 134 of substrate 10. By way of example and not limitation, FIG. 14E illustrates one such structure as compliant coupling material 136. Compliant coupling material 136 at least partially fills void 126 and forms a flexible or compliant interface between emerging contact pin 132 and remaining substrate portions 134 of substrate 10. In FIG. 14F, the back or opposite surface 138 of substrate 10 is thinned either through an etching process or through a mechanical grinding or abrasion process for at least a thickness or distance 140 to release or free contact pin 142 from adjacent portions 134 of substrate 10. As illustrated, contact pin 142 is formed from a portion of substrate 10 and remains positioned at original location 112 through compliant coupling means, namely compliant coupling material 136.

[0068] In FIG. 14G, contact pin assembly 144 may further include a redistribution layer such as conductive trace 146 for electrically routing contact pin 142 to a separate location. FIG. 14G further illustrates a via 148 which may further electrically couple conductive trace 146 to an opposite side 150 of substrate 110 for further routing on opposite side 150 or for coupling with a probe 152 at a contact pad 154. Additionally, contact pin 142 may be further coated with additional conductive material 156 at a bottom or interconnect end to encapsulate the contact pin 142. Consistent with the formation of conductive material 130 (FIG. 14D) about the contact of contact pin 132 and throughout void 126, conductive material 156 may be formed through various processing steps including plating, sputtering or other coating approaches.

[0069] FIG. 15 shows a cross sectional view illustrating a compliant contact pin assembly, according to yet another embodiment of the present invention. The present embodiment accommodates inline probing of the back of the contact pin 162 without subjecting the contact pad of a device-under-test to the damaging effects of a direct probe. A contact pin assembly 158 is generally fabricated according to the steps of FIGS. 14A-14E, however, a via 160 is formed, for example through laser machining, through the contact pin 162. Via 160 is then filled with a conductive material 164 for electrically coupling the contact end 163 of contact pin 162 with the opposite side 170 of contact pin assembly 158. An additional contact pad 166 may be further formed for direct probing by a probe 168.

[0070] FIGS. 16A-16F and FIG. 17 show cross sectional views illustrating various embodiments of dual sided compliant contact pin assemblies. These embodiments facilitate the

formation of compliant contacts on both sides of a contact pin assembly to accommodate an offset configuration or a redistribution arrangement.

[0071] In FIG. 16A, substrate 10 has defined thereon a region or location 312 for the formation of a dual sided contact pin assembly. In the present embodiment, the contact pin assembly is comprised of a contact pin on each surface or side of the substrate 10 that are electrically coupled together. At the location 312, an emerging contact pin 334 on a first side 314 is located and defined through the formation of voids 328, according to one or more of the substrate removal techniques describe above, surrounding the emerging contact pin 334. A via void 316 is also formed partially through substrate 10 also using one or more of the substrate removal techniques describe herein. Via void 316 provides an aperture for the formation of an electrical connection therethrough between first side 314 and second side 315.

[0072] In FIG. 16B, an emerging contact pin 335 is defined through the formation of voids 329 surrounding emerging contact pin 335, according to one or more of the substrate removal techniques described herein. A via void 317 provides an aperture partially through substrate 10 from second side 315. Via voids 316 and 317 form a via void through the entire thickness of substrate 10 accommodating the formation of electrical continuity between the contact pins formed on sides 314 and 315.

[0073] When laser machining or other coarse substrate removal techniques are used, a cleaning process may further be utilized to soften any rough edges and to clean any scorched substrate from the respective voids. By way of example and not limitation, exemplary cleaning processes may include TetraMethyl Ammonium Hydroxide (TMAH) or Propylene Glycol TMAH as the etching agent. Such substrate post-process cleaning processes are contemplated and the specific application of these processes is known by those of ordinary skill in the art and are not further described herein.

[0074] As illustrated in FIG. 16C, if substrate 10 is comprised of a semi-conductive or conductive material, an insulative layer 331, such as an oxide layer, is formed on the sidewalls of voids 328, 329 and via voids 316, 317. When substrate 10 is comprised of a nonconductive material, then an insulative layer is unnecessary. In one embodiment, the emerging contact pins 334 and 335 in addition to the surfaces of voids 328, 329 and via voids 316, 317 are conductively coated by depositing a conductive material 32 generally over the emerging contact

pins 334 and 335 and throughout the voids 328, 329. Conductive material 32 is further deposited about via voids 316, 317 forming a conductive via 319. In one particular embodiment, conductive material 32 is formed through a metallic plating process which results in conductive surfaces.

[0075] As illustrated in FIG. 16D, a compliant coupling structure couples emerging contact pins 334 and 335 with surrounding remaining portions 336 of substrate 10. By way of example and not limitation, one such structure is compliant coupling material 38. Compliant coupling material 38 at least partially fills voids 328 and 329 and forms a resilient compliant interface between emerging contact pins 334 and 335 with remaining substrate portions 336 of substrate 10. Suitable compliant coupling materials were described above with reference to FIG. 1. In another embodiment, via 319 may be further filled with compliant coupling material 38 in lieu of masking via 319 from being filled.

[0076] To enable compliant movement relative to the remaining substrate portions 36, the contact pins are released from the remaining substrate portions 336 by thinning side 315 by at least a distance 330 to release emerging contact pin 334 and correspondingly thinning side 314 by at least a distance 331 to release emerging contact pin 335. In FIG. 16E, the surface of side 314 is masked and the surface of side 315 of substrate 10 is thinned either through an etching process for at least a thickness or distance 330 to release or free contact pin 342 from adjacent portions of substrate 10. Similarly, the surface of thinned side 315 is masked and the surface of side 314 of substrate 10 is thinned for at least a thickness or distance 331 to release or free contact pin 343 from adjacent portions of substrate 10. As illustrated, contact pins 342 and 343 are formed from a portion of substrate 10 and remain positioned at original region or location 312 (FIG. 16A) through compliant coupling means, namely compliant coupling material 38.

[0077] FIG. 16F illustrates a contact pin assembly 346, in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention. Compliant axis 348 relative to contact pin 342 and compliant axis 349 relative to contact pin 343 illustrates the axis of motion of contact pins 342, 343 as a result of the resilient or elastic nature of compliant coupling material 38. Furthermore, in one exemplary embodiment, the compliant coupling material is electrically conductive and is illustrated as compliant coupling material 38. Electrical continuity exists from contact tip or

contact end 350 of contact pin 342 to substrate 10 by way of conductive material 32 electrically coupled with electrically conductive compliant coupling material 38 which further is electrically coupled to a portion 352 of the conductive material affixed to the remaining substrate 10. Routing of an electrical signal detected at contact end 350 of contact pin 342 may be further routed via one or more conductive traces 354 to conductive via 319. Similarly, electrical continuity exists from contact tip or contact end 351 of contact pin 343 to substrate 10 by way of conductive material 32 electrically coupled with electrically conductive compliant coupling material 38 which further is electrically coupled to a portion 353 of the conductive material affixed to the remaining substrate 10. Routing of a signal detected at contact end 351 of contact pin 343 may be further routed via one or more conductive traces 355 to conductive via 319. Conductive traces 354, 355 may be formed according to various interconnection techniques including masking, deposition and etching techniques, the specifics of which are well known to those of ordinary skill in the art.

[0078] FIG. 17 illustrates a contact pin assembly 366, in accordance with another embodiment of the present invention. Contact pins 362, 363 may be formed according to the processes described with respect to FIGS. 16A-16E. In the present embodiment, electrical continuity between contact pins 362, 363 is formed by a conductive trace on one or more sides 364, 366. By way of example, FIG. 17 illustrates a conductive trace 368 formed on a first side 364 and coupled between a portion 370 of the conductive material affixed to the remaining substrate 10 of contact pin 362 and a portion 372 of the conductive material affixed to the remaining substrate 10 of contact pin 363. The present embodiment further includes electrically conductive compliant coupling material 38 for providing electrical continuity between contact end 374 of contact pin 362 and portion 370 of the conductive material affixed to the remaining substrate 10. Similarly, contact end 376 of contact pin 363 is electrically coupled to portion 372 by electrically conductive compliant coupling material 38.

[0079] FIG. 18 illustrates a contact pin assembly 74, in accordance with another embodiment of the present invention. The processing steps for the formation of contact pin assembly 74 occur according to the processing steps of FIGS. 6A-6B to form voids 76 around contact pin 78 with the center bore being filled with a conductive material 80 coupled to an electrical trace 82. According to the present embodiment, a compliant coupling structure

provides the compliant action for contact pin 78. In the present embodiment, the compliant coupling structure, by way of example and not limitation, is implemented as a thinned substrate web 84 which is thinned according to the corresponding widths of void 76. The thinning process enables contact pin 78 to flex, as illustrated in FIG. 19, when a device-under-test 56 having a contact pad 58 is coupled therewith. Additionally, according to FIG. 18, various contact ends or tips 86 may be formed according to deposition, plating or other processes known by those of ordinary skill in the art.

[0080] FIG. 20 illustrates a testing system utilizing one or more embodiments of the contact pin assemblies described above. A device-under-test such as a semiconductor wafer 88 having one or more contact pads 90 thereon is coupled with a contactor card 92 which includes one or more contact pin assemblies 94. The contact pin assemblies 94 are further coupled with a tester 96 to form a test system 98. Contactor card 92 on semiconductor wafer 88 may be physically or mechanically coupled through the application of force, or may be coupled together through the use of air pressure as generated by a vacuum 100.

[0081] The foregoing descriptions of specific embodiments of the present invention have been presented for purposes of illustration and description. They are not intended to be exhaustive or to limit the invention to the precise forms disclosed, and many modifications and variations are possible in light of the above teaching. The embodiments were chosen and described in order to best explain the principles of the invention and its practical application, to thereby enable others of ordinary skill in this art to best utilize the invention and various embodiments with various modifications. It is intended that the scope of the inventions be identified by the claims appended hereto and their equivalence.